

The Vigilantes

Charles Pinteem: The Critter

There must be something in the water of Valesboro, Tennessee. Maybe we have radioactive elements in our soil or something. The EPA will probably order a mass evacuation of the town someday, but most of us will be staying put until then.

For the past three generations, every child born in Valesboro has had *some* kind of birthmark. The lucky babies came out of the womb with only an inconspicuous patch of red. Others emerged deformed. No two cases were the same, but I drew the genetic wildcard. I entered the world with gray skin, red irises, and long-toed rodent feet.

Mama called me *Chip*. My childhood bullies called me “Rat Boy.” My best friend’s conspiracy nut parents called me “Demon Child.” My high school crushes called me “Never in a million years.” My stepdad called me “Get out of my house, or I swear I’ll pull the trigger!” My real dad still hasn’t called me at all.

Spirituality has never been a huge part of my life, but I know that there’s gotta be someone in the spirit world looking out for me. I’ve survived more traps and toxins than I care to mention, and over half of those near-death experiences were my fault. Those escapes feel like hollow victories now, though. I’d barely managed to save my *own* skin! Now look at me—Chip the Critter—rescuing the princess and stuff.

Guadalupe Reyes: La Vaquera

The working men of San Emilio are all the same. They spend every second of free time ranting and raving about things they cannot control. They pat one another on the back for their big talk in between menial tasks. Then they go home and expect to be in *complete* control!

Somehow, the retirees are even worse. In the diner where I worked, they still linger in the afternoons. They do not wish to manipulate women's bodies up-close; they only wish to prod their minds from a safe, comfortable distance.

“¿*Dónde está tu hombre, señorita?*” (Where's your man, little lady?) Every time I would visibly show agitation, they would follow-up with their favorite line.

“¿*Aye! ¿Estás enojada? ¿Necesitas un esposo cálmarte!*” (Oh! You're angry? You need a husband to calm you down!)

“My family raised me for a life in the rodeo,” I once told a coworker, “not . . . whatever this is!”

“Yeah?” she responded. “Well, my pop always expected me to marry rich, but that ain't happenin' either!” Later that same day, I saw the writing on the walls in the form of a poster. I saw an opportunity to reject idle talk and take action. The poster read:

¡SE BUSCA VIGILANTES!

VIGILANTES WANTED!

J. Atticus Stoker: Father Firearms

In any period of history, the real movers and shakers are the ones who aren't quite right in the head. The crazy people who never learn to forgive become society's villains; the crazy people who have been taught mercy become its heroes. I've been on both ends of that spectrum. When several of the largest prisons in the United States experienced simultaneous jailbreaks, I was able to recognize at least one inmate from each prison on the news. I'm not their brother anymore, though.

The massive jailbreaks across the nation forced the understaffed police force to launch a recruitment campaign for vigilantes and bounty hunters. Vigilantes have no dress code, but the cops at the station *did* make me cover the gang-related tattoos on my biceps. I decided to baptize them in fire by getting two full ink-sleeves of flames. I look like a muscle-bound phoenix now.

From my perch in the rafters, I witness the entire scene. The ambassador's daughter—the princess—sits chained to a chair in the center of the warehouse. A pool of dirty-gold light illuminates her. The situation is an obvious trap, but Charlie and Lupe know what they're getting into. The princess probably expects a US Army SWAT team to come for her. I will never forget the look on her face as she realizes that a Latina cowgirl and a teenaged mouse-man have come to save the day instead. I stroke my mountain man beard and watch the scene, waiting for my cue.

Thugs emerge from behind shipping crates like ants from their hill. Vaquera whips out her pistol and lands several well-placed bullets in the chests of nearby attackers. In between shots, she swings her lasso with her other hand. Its loop ensnares thugs' ankles to throw them off balance.

Anyone who gets too close has to deal with Critter. The kid is fast. He's not fast enough to outrun a car or anything, but he's explosively quick in short bursts—like a scurrying rodent. He uses a combination of kickboxing and parkour to prevent any thugs from laying a finger on his tag-team partner.

Charlie's not the only one who's got her back, though, and Lupe's not the only one packing heat. They saved the best piece for the veteran. The nose of my sniper rifle rises, smelling the danger and fun in the air, and I load a fresh banana clip into it. I pick off the henchmen on the edges of the pack. Some produce pistols from their pockets. My shots neutralize their threat before they can aim. I lower my weapon and cross myself three times. (The old OCD mandates that I do it three times every time.) Then I raise my communicator to my mouth.

“We're ready whenever you are, Geary.”

John Francis Geary: Gearshift the Getaway Kid

Sometimes the bounty hunters like to rib me about my nickname. They want to know why I'm the Getaway Kid, not the Getaway Man or the Getaway King. After all, why would a balding, middle-aged man with wire-rim glasses and a bushy mustache let his coworkers call him a kid? My answer is simple: John Geary may have grown up, but his inner child lives on. I refuse to let the men in suits take him from me.

It was as a kid that I figured out how to navigate the world of society. Traveling directions have always come second-nature to me, but social cues are another beast entirely. I taught myself to imagine my psyche as a car transmission. With practice, I learned to shift my brain from son-gear to brother-gear to lover-gear to friend-gear to subordinate-gear to boss-gear, depending on the situation. Learning to drive with a manual transmission was easy by comparison.

Over my walkie-talkie radio, I dial into Police Chief Pyke's frequency.

"I can have the princess and my team out of the building and over the bridge in seven minutes flat."

"Make it five," comes his gruff reply. My Jaguar emerges from the shadows, slips through an open garage door, and prowls its way up to the side of the warehouse.

I open the doors. The girl rushes into the getaway car. She tries to make small talk with me. I tell her that we can chitchat after we are out of harm's way. In my mind's eye, I see a stoplight hovering in front of my car. It's a drag racing stoplight: three sets of twin yellows and one set of twin greens. (There's also a pair of red lights, but I've never needed those.)

Yellow.

Charles, Guadalupe, and Atticus climb into the car. They buckle in. They know the drill. Each member of the team takes turns congratulating the others, and I become the audience to a play-by-play recap of their rescue mission.

Yellow.

Chief Pyke's voice crackles in my radio.

"I hope you're feeling froggy, John, 'cause you're about to miss the jump."

Yellow

Green!

The sole of my foot embraces the gas pedal with the forceful tenderness of a man who knows his instrument better than he knows his own mind. The solid scenery around us melts into a tunnel of liquid blurs. Three corner-turns later, I enter the road that leads to the river. In the distance, I see the drawbridge transform from a single road into two ramps. My foot knows the speed I need to reach in order to compensate for my lack of momentum, and it presses the pedal accordingly.

Like an arrow from Apollo's bow, the car soars into the open air. I hear screams, but the confident purr of the engine steadies my hand. I check the dashboard clock. It's six in the morning. Breakfast at the mess hall should be ready any minute now. The vehicle lands on the other side of the river with a roller coaster *clunk*, and we ride off into the sunrise.